

Chuck Arning and Kevin Klyberg

# McCoy Stadium

## Legacy or Folly?

Even before construction began, controversy and intrigue surrounded McCoy Stadium, home of the Pawtucket Red Sox, a minor league affiliate of the Boston Red Sox. The original plans called for a stadium seating 15,000 fans; but when completed in 1942, the facility only seated 5,800. The original cost for the stadium was projected to be about \$600,000. When the project was started in 1936, Mayor Thomas P. McCoy predicted that the federal government would contribute \$500,000 through the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the City of Pawtucket would ante up just \$100,000. "That's a bargain in any man's land," Mayor McCoy was quoted as saying.<sup>1</sup>

By 1940, the estimated cost for the still unfinished stadium had escalated to roughly \$1.2 million dollars. This construction cost exceeded that for the Yale Bowl, which seated 70,896 fans, and Harvard Stadium combined. Even Boston's majestic Fenway Park had an assessed valuation of only \$764,500 and it seated 34,000 baseball enthusiasts.<sup>2</sup> It is no wonder that the press and critics of the mayor dubbed this New Deal project "McCoy's Folly!"

*Interior of McCoy Stadium looking toward home plate and the third base line.*



As a Democratic mayor of a depression-wracked industrial city, McCoy saw the tremendous opportunity that the WPA represented. Under Mayor McCoy's guidance, Pawtucket benefited greatly from the influx of federal dollars that put city residents back to work building important community structures. With WPA funding, McCoy constructed a water filtration plant (1934), a new high school (1938), and an impressive city hall (1935). But it was Mayor McCoy's love of baseball that generated the greatest controversy and legacy of his administration.

"McCoy's Folly" was either the vision of a great mayor with bull-headed tenacity or the work of a corrupt political machine bilking the City of Pawtucket out of hundreds of thousands of dollars for a baseball field built in a swamp. Stories are still told about workers returning to work the next day to find that all the previous day's work was for naught as not only were the freshly laid footings gone, but so was the bulldozer that was parked next to them—all victims of the Hammond Pond Swamp. Yet today, McCoy Stadium is viewed as one of the most significant and fan-friendly sports complexes in Rhode Island. Where does the truth lie?

The story begins in 1920, when the U.S. Finishing Company, a local textile firm, wanted to give the Hammond Pond site to the city for use as recreational fields. The City of Pawtucket turned down the offer because its engineers had determined that the land was too wet, containing quicksand or water-bearing silt. City engineers "experienced considerable difficulty laying a sewer main in an adjoining street. They reported that workers did not seem to sink as rapidly as men usually do in quicksand, but that if a man stayed very long on one spot he would sink."<sup>3</sup>

Yet, just 15 years later, Pawtucket purchased the Hammond Pond site and several adjacent plots for a total of \$39,455.<sup>4</sup> The challenge of draining the pond and surrounding swamp area was considerable. The Hammond Pond quagmire sucked up cement, vehicles, pipe, and man-hours at an incredible rate. By October 1, 1941, over a million man-hours of labor had gone into the draining, excavating, and filling of the Hammond Pond site. Over a mile of storm sewer pipes was installed to drain off the pond water and still concrete slipped beneath the mud of the pond. Floodlights were installed in February 1938 to quicken the pace of draining the site. Two 125-men crews worked two shifts draining

*New seating along the third base line and in right field and center field. Paw Sox bullpen can also be seen next to the special event deck.*

the site and preparing the land grading. By August, four 6-hour shifts of WPA workers struggled to complete the concrete piers.<sup>5</sup> While this seems to be an incredible use of manpower, Mayor McCoy was only too happy to oblige. His political power base was dependent upon Pawtucket's ethnic working class. Every new worker receiving a city paycheck was another voter he could count on in November.

By October, the 50 concrete piers had consumed 5,000 cubic yards of cement, 420 tons of steel, and 10,000 cubic yards of gravel.<sup>6</sup> Still, problems persisted. Engineers found that underground springs were flooding the concrete piers causing them to sink. The solution was to drive wooden piles deep into the ground to support the concrete piers. Contemporary newspaper reports tell of workmen standing "in mud, water, and ice driving more than 800 piles 30 feet long and a foot in diameter straight into the ground around the new concrete piers."<sup>7</sup>

Based on its engineers' evaluations, the Works Progress Administration pulled out of the project thereby precluding further federal funds until "definite assurances was received that a safely constructed stadium could be built at a reasonable cost."<sup>8</sup>

Despite harsh criticism and scathing headlines, the mayor's project moved ahead. On a cold November 4, 1940, which just happened to be the morning before Election Day, Mayor McCoy laid the cornerstone for the Hammond Pond Stadium. The coincidence of the cornerstone ceremony and the upcoming election was no accident. McCoy took advantage of the occasion to blast his critics. "As for those carping critics, let me say to them, this stadium will bring pleasure and happiness to the people of this city long after they have returned to the dust whence they came."<sup>9</sup>

On July 4, 1942, the Pawtucket Slaters took the field for the first time at their new home, the Hammond Pond Stadium. Mayor McCoy took the opportunity to chide "our critics who have



whined about the cost."<sup>10</sup> The stadium proved to be one of the last major projects completed under Mayor McCoy, who passed away while in office in 1945. The next year, Hammond Pond Stadium was renamed in his honor.

The Slater's 4-2 victory over the Lynn team that day was the beginning of the city's long relationship with professional baseball, though not always a smooth one. The Slaters, an independent franchise, belonged to the old New England League. Many future Hall of Famer's would perfect their skills here. For example, the Class B Nashua Dodgers came to town with future big league stars Don Newcomb and Roy Campanella. Many major league teams would play exhibition games at the stadium including the Brooklyn Dodgers, Philadelphia Phillies, and the Boston Braves. By far, the largest attendance came when 14,000 fans turned out to see the New York Yankees take on the hometown team. Center

field at that time was 505 feet from home plate and the fans stood behind restraining ropes.<sup>11</sup>

For 30 years, a series of minor league and semi-pro teams used the field. In 1973, the Boston Red Sox moved their AAA farm team from Louisville, Kentucky to Pawtucket. This team struggled along near bankruptcy for a few seasons until 1977, when Ben Mondor, a successful renovator of old mills in the Blackstone Valley, bought the barely breathing franchise and turned it into one of the most successful and highly regarded minor league teams in the country.

Nonetheless, half a century of great games and championship teams could not change the fact that McCoy Stadium was constructed over a swamp. In 1993, the Pawtucket Red Sox had envisioned a 2,500-seat expansion along the right field line. The proposal was thwarted when soil testing proved that the ground would not support the structure. The ghost of Hammond Pond forced another change in construction plans. Fortunately, the Pawtucket Red Sox creatively installed 700 additional bleacher seats to help hold overflow crowds at this immensely popular minor league facility. Finally, in 1998-1999, a \$16 million renovation project increased capacity to 10,000 and added several new amenities to the

oldest park in AAA-baseball. Today, McCoy Stadium is viewed as one of the jewels of the International League and physical testimony of Pawtucket's political and environmental history. Mayor Thomas McCoy would also be proud that \$12 million for the renovations came from a statewide bond issue, which once more brought new construction jobs to Pawtucket.

#### Notes

- <sup>1-8</sup> Joseph A. Kelly, "McCoy's Dream Stadium To Cost \$1,100,000 Or More." *Providence Journal*, October 26, 1941.
- <sup>9</sup> "Mayor Lays Cornerstone At Hammond Pond Stadium." *Pawtucket Times*, November 4, 1940.
- <sup>10</sup> "Thousands Gather To View Opening of City Stadium." *Pawtucket Times*, July 6, 1942.
- <sup>11</sup> George Patrick Duffy, "Hammond Pond Becomes Site of McCoy Stadium in the 1940s." *The Evening Times* (Pawtucket, RI), July 11, 1988.

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Photos courtesy Pawtucket Red Sox.

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Samuel Less

## The Ballpark at St. George Station, Staten Island, New York

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Stephen King may have considered it and then discarded the story line as too improbable. Imagine, if you will, a parcel of land that seems to demonstrate a preference for the development it will support; or, that through the years during which it quietly endured abuse as a railyard, it insidiously steers human affairs so that it can relive its past glory and realize its destiny. A haunted stadium? Give you goose bumps?

The environmental impact statement prepared for the new minor league baseball stadium that will become the home of the Staten Island Yankees, a minor league affiliate of the New York Yankees, will clearly not read like a Stephen King

novel, but some chance discoveries almost instill this administrative document with a literary plot.

When a baseball stadium project was proposed in 1999, the development site served as a commuter parking facility for the Staten Island Ferry. Little evidence remained of its past use, which for 80 years, was a railroad freight yard. While the layer of rail yard history is a rich and hallowed ground for many, it only obscured the irony that a baseball stadium, actually a long forgotten covered grandstand, had previously existed on the site. In addition, the baseball nine that formerly played there bore the name of the major league rival of the future stadium's occupants.

The waterfront area in the vicinity of the stadium site in what was known as New Brighton